

STEPPING OUT



THE SAME-SEX DANCE SCENE

Marianka Swain reports on the Pink Jukebox Trophy's close battles, supreme champions and inspiring debuts

Biblical flooding caused nationwide chaos on February 15, but nothing could stop the world's best same-sex dancers streaming into London's Rivoli Ballroom. "We did panic slightly, with trains cancelled and issues with flights, but thankfully everyone made it," recalls Jacky Logan, who, with Ralf Schiller and a crack team of volunteers, makes the Pink Jukebox Trophy (PJT) not only the longest-running same-sex ballroom competition, but one of the best.

"Our volunteers are absolutely key," observes Jacky. "They make it a real community event, and that feeds into the friendliness of it, the atmosphere, and the fact that everyone – competitors and spectators – has a brilliant time."

This year, organisers took steps to improve spectator enjoyment by tweaking the format:



Women's A Latin finalists Rachel Sparks and Darya Trayanovich

instead of holding back all four finals until the evening, they had two complete competitions in the morning and two in the afternoon, meaning those with morning tickets had a more satisfying experience.

It was a good year to implement it, with four contests showcasing real depth of talent. Women's ballroom was well fought at every level, notes Jacky: "When you watch a packed B quarter-final with everyone capable of moving forward, it makes you really excited for the future of this category."

However, A ballroom superstars Caroline Privou and Petra Zimmerman continue

to reign supreme. The unstoppable German champions, magnificent advocates for women's ballroom, were placed first in every style on their way to clinching the title. The good news is that more and more

dancers are following in their graceful footsteps, including fourth-placed British couple Heather Devine and Chrisi Lyons.

Hungary's Reka Fuleki and Beatrix Rencsisovszki, runners-up in A ballroom, bounced back from last year's shocking A Latin result, when they failed to make the final. The pair took the title with a dynamic performance and were visibly thrilled at their

success. New Danish formation Kirsten Moeller and Nete Keum shadowed them closely.

Csaba Csetneki and Balázs Gáti added to Hungary's tally with their triumph in the men's A ballroom, seeing off close rivals Axel Zischka and Stefan Lehner from France and Brits John Church and Alex Lewalle, while in the men's A Latin two international couples who represent the UK offered a fascinating contrast in styles. Nejc Jus and Lemington Ridley gave a masterclass in beautifully fluid contemporary work, juxtaposed with Ignacio Bogaz Marin and Vish Mehta's more traditional, lively Latin movement.

"It shows how many ways you can interpret same-sex dance," explains Jacky. "Both had great male energy, but channelled

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Women's A ballroom winners Caroline Privou and Petra Zimmerman

it very differently. Those roles are far less rigidly defined than in male/female ballroom partnerships, and that makes it fascinating to watch."

It can also test the judges. Adjudicator Margaryta Vyshetravska noted how much she enjoyed both couples, having to watch for the slightest mistake to separate them. Nejc and Lemington ultimately prevailed, to the delight of the home crowd, who cheered them to victory last year.

The 2014 judging panel included the debut of *Strictly Come Dancing's* Nicole Cutler. "I had an amazing day," she says. "It was truly remarkable, so interesting and challenging, and it was an absolute pleasure to be part of such a wonderful competition."

Joining Nicole was Stuart Hatton AKA Mr

Men's A Latin winners Nejc Jus and Lemington Ridley



Iglesias Marzal and Ainhoa Moreno Perez. They had no experience of same-sex competition, as there aren't any opportunities in their country, but they had great technique and came with very vocal,

orange-T-shirt-wearing supporters!"

Lack of competitive experience, and indeed English, was no impediment: the newcomers won the C Latin, and also won over the crowd. Their dance teacher, Doris Palao, expressed their

Gay UK, who praised the "electrifying atmosphere", camaraderie among the dancers and tremendous spectator support. Stuart and *Dance Today's* Kim Thompson awarded the prizes, and Jacky noted how gratifying it is to see the competition winning support from new quarters. "The PJT celebrates the founding of our same-sex dance social club, back in 1996, and we're so proud of our longevity, but also our growth."

"I was especially pleased to see more entries from British couples outside the capital, as that's one of the big aims of the UK Same Sex Dance Council. It used to be mainly Londoners; now, there's a big crowd from Norwich, Stoke-on-Trent, Manchester and so on."

"We also saw our first female couple from Spain, Janire



Men's A ballroom winners Csaba Csetneki and Balázs Gáti (left)



The women's A Latin finalists

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appreciation: "We want to thank everyone for their hard work and dedication in putting on this amazing competition, and for giving us such a kind reception. It's been a wonderful experience and we'll never forget it."

The action-packed day ended with dancers from different countries coming together for the ball. "Despite dancing all day, they were on the floor right up until midnight," marvels Jacky. "It's been another fantastic PJT, and the excitement continues with the European Championships coming to Blackpool in June. I can't wait!" ●